

# APPLIED COMICS COLLABORATIONS

Ways for humanities and social science researchers to work together with comics creators.



# APPLIED COMICS COLLABORATIONS

This guide is an overview of a model of collaboration for researchers and comics creators to work together in making applied comics, comics with a specific job to do, especially in humanities and social science research.

There are uses for comics in:

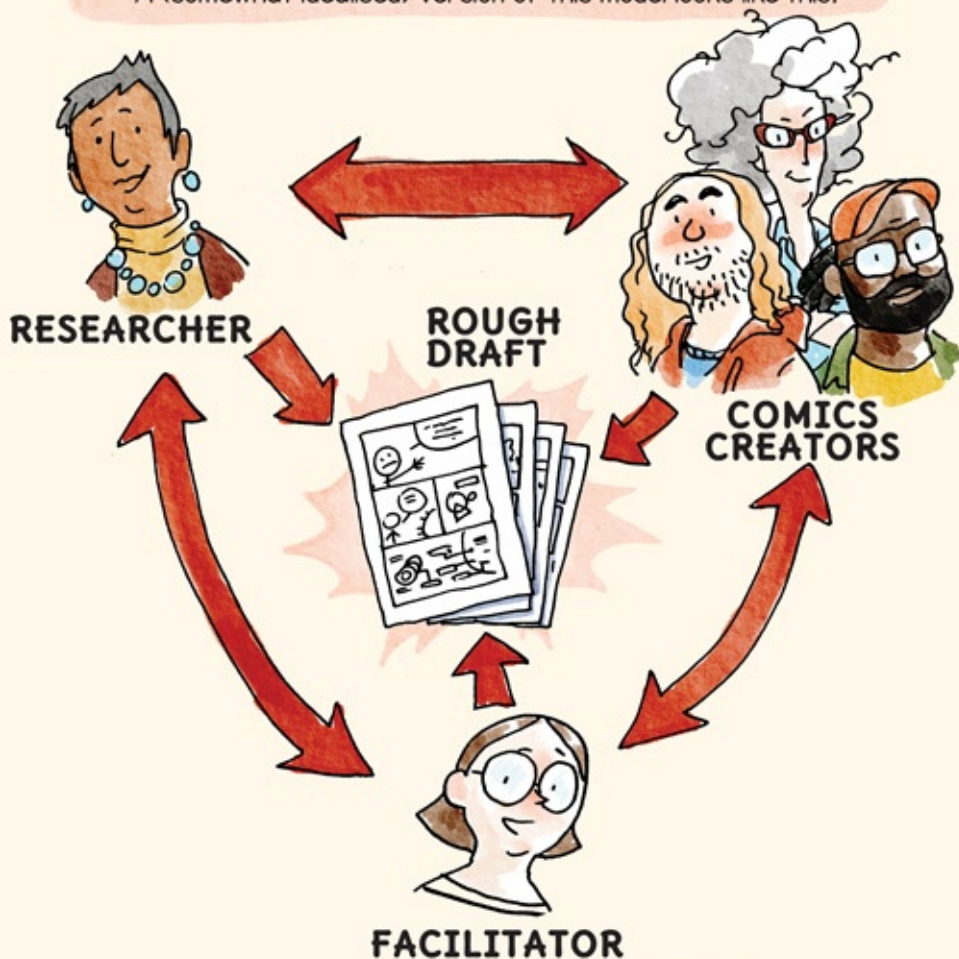
- Communicating academic research to non-academic audiences.
  - Presenting research findings back to project participants.
  - Explaining what project participants are being asked to do.
- ... and more.

These uses of applied comics can seem straight forward, and sometimes they are. But there's often complexity and nuance and challenges to established ways of thinking that can be hard to put into words (or words and pictures). Comics often look effortlessly simple but it takes plenty of planning, drafting and redrafting to get to a page that'll be read in seconds.



The model of collaboration in this guide is that a researcher, three comics creators, and a facilitator all work towards making a **rough draft comic**. This emphasis on a draft can explore multiple possible ways forward before committing to final artwork. Focusing on a draft is also a chance to work through complex issues of representation inherent in people-based research.

A (somewhat idealised) version of this model looks like this:



Once an initial rough draft is completed, you can refine it, show it to your intended target audience, and ultimately draw it up and publish it! You need a draft to get to that stage, so that's what this guide covers.

But life is rarely so neat, especially now that lots of people are finding new ways of working:

- from home;
- in physically distanced ways;
- across insecure short-term contracts;
- when it's difficult to secure funding for projects.

(These issues apply to lots of freelance comics creators, as well as to academic researchers).

This guide is an overview of a collaborative way to start planning and making applied comics. It is based on a 3-phase pilot project involving 14 people, conducted during lockdown in 2020.

This guide is aimed at:  
**COMICS CREATORS**  
**RESEARCHERS**  
**FACILITATORS**

There is also a folder of free downloadable resources you can adapt to run your own project using this Applied Comics Collaborations methodology

<http://appliedcomicsetc.com/collaborations>



# FOR COMICS CREATORS

The ACC process uses a collaborative team of 3 comics creators to generate a range of insights and approaches to communicating research.

This form of collaboration can be a really fun, unique challenge.

And you get to use your skills to share important research that could actually make the world a better place!

But it may be quite different from how you usually work...



For starters, the team is NOT broken down into the traditional studio system of writer, penciler, inker etc...



Rather all 3 creators work independently to generate rough drafts, which are then workshopped collaboratively to see what sparks the most useful ways of visualising the research.



For creators, this process is scheduled as 2 days of paid work spread over one calendar week.

From a comics creator's point of view, the process starts like this:

**STEP 1: RECEIVE RESEARCHER'S NOTES, READ AND DIGEST.**



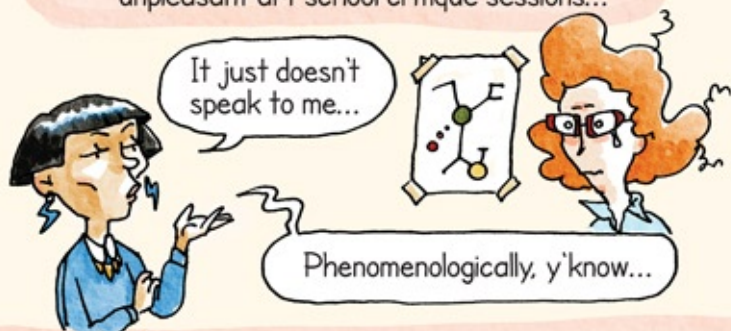
**STEP 2: BRAIN DUMP OF VISUAL IDEAS.**



**STEP 3: COLLABORATE, LISTEN AND REFINE.**



If all this is giving you flashbacks to unpleasant art school critique sessions...



...rest assured that ACC is specifically structured for open, supportive collaboration and discussion within the team.

Everyone reads each other's drafts...



...and then talks them over in a series of 3 video-calls involving all 3 creators, researcher and facilitator



This gives a chance to talk about what works and what doesn't, to clarify, expand, and ensure accuracy, with the researcher's input.

Over the week, each comics creator revises and re-shares their draft, working towards one collaborative version incorporating the best of the whole team's thinking.



Having roughed out the shape of this collaborative process, let's look in more detail at the individual steps...

## STEP 1: RECEIVE RESEARCHER'S NOTES, READ AND DIGEST.



Keep in mind, this material may represent the work of this particular academic's **entire** adult life...



Notes may include bulletpoint lists, text summaries, diagrams, videos, or even full academic papers.



Now while in an ideal world the information provided will be **exactly** the right level of detail, clear, concise and peppered with a perfect collection of juicy, illustrable anecdotes...

...it might not be.





Just explore the material. Take notes or doodle:  
whatever helps as you start to process the information.  
Write down any questions or things you want to clarify.



Don't be shy.  
Obvious questions  
are sometimes the  
most productive.

Oh good.



Most readers won't be familiar with this research either (research is  
about building new knowledge, after all) so your initial reactions can help  
to figure out points of entry to the material.

This is also a good opportunity to look at some other  
non-fiction comics and see what works...

And what  
doesn't.



## STEP 2: BRAINDUMP OF INITIAL IDEAS.

Get some ideas down for how you might communicate what you have been reading.



NOTE: you do **not** need to be funny or "cool".



If you think of a great joke or a lovely moment, sure, put it down, but you don't **need** humour to "sell" the material.

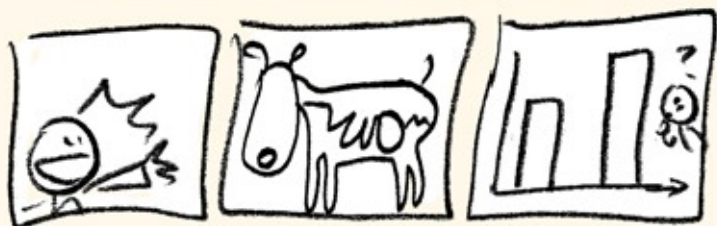


Similarly, you don't need high-concept framing devices: time-travelling kids or whatever..



Your initial attempts to explain your developing understanding as you wrestle with the material are what's most valuable at this stage.

The goal is to quickly generate rough thumbnails you can share and use to trade ideas. So long as they are readable, that's enough. Do **not** overwork them!



Actually, doing too much drawing at this stage is **actively unhelpful**, as it might reduce flexibility and/or detract from more useful but less polished ideas.



## STEP 3: COLLABORATE, LISTEN AND REFINE.



The nature of the conversation can change in interesting ways as the 3 meetings progress, as collaborators start to “get” each other and respond on a deeper level...

By the end of the week, the team will have produced a **full rough draft** of the comic.



This will likely...

- feature rough thumbnail art;
- be cobbled together from parts of everyone's contributions;
- still have holes and patchy bits;
- roughly cover the research material to a level that could be taken to a final draft later;
- be a somewhat finished **draft**, but not yet a finished readable **comic**.

### THAT'S OK - THIS IS THE GOAL!

It is common for academic research to pause to seek further funding, refine its target audiences, or because other work has to take priority.

Treating this collaborative draft as a goal in its own right helps to build to a strong project, making sure that all the collaborating comics creators are paid and credited for their involvement but without leaving them in limbo until the project can proceed.

# FOR RESEARCHERS

Comics can be a powerful tool to share your work with a wider audience.



It can also be eye-opening to see your own work reflected back to you in multi-modal form.



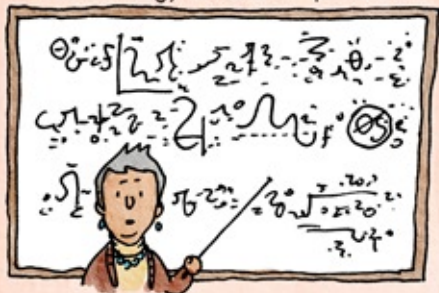
## STEP 1: PREPARE NOTES FOR CREATORS.



The key here is finding a healthy level of detail, about one area of your research. As intelligent laypeople, your creative collaborators will rely on you to signpost a field they do not know as closely as you do.

A few suggestions:

Avoid specialist academic terminology wherever possible.



Some key terms can be used so long as you explain them clearly.

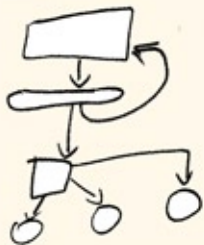
Existing academic publications are likely to be too technical and/or specialised.

My journal abstract is only 250 words. You could read that as a summary...

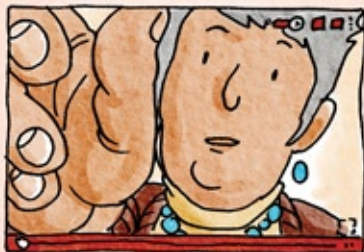
Er...204 of these words are jargon!



Bullet points, doodles, sketched-out diagrams and flow charts can be useful to lay out some key features of your research.



Or try recording a talking head video of yourself explaining your work.



In all cases, explanatory material that you produce especially for this group is likely to be more useful than pre-existing material.

If you find it hard to simplify:



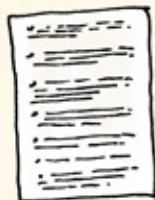
But... but...  
the **nuance**...



Start by limiting yourself to **one sticky note** of bullet points and/or a 1-minute video.

Look at it. Can you still recognise your research?

Add detail up to **one** side of A4 bullet points to ensure the integrity of your research, for the audience you have in mind.



Notes that have been useful in previous collaborations include:

- Concrete, visualisable examples.
- Contextual "general knowledge" around the topic area: major theories and scholarly issues, general facts about historical period and geographic area, list of core terminology, dates, place names etc...
- Illustrative anecdotes, personal and/or related to the research.



Well, I really got interested in this topic back in '04...

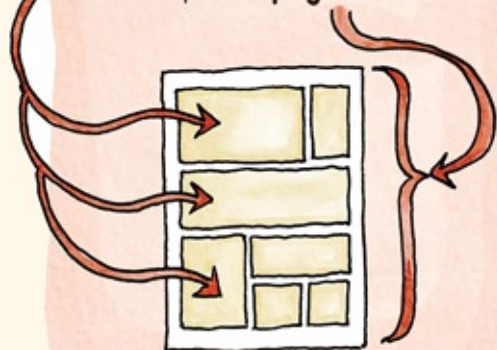
...or was it '05...

## STEP 2: SEND TO CREATORS AND WAIT.



This may be a good opportunity to get acquainted with some of the basics of **comics creation**...

**Panels** are the little boxes that make up each **page** of a comic.



Each panel can be about **one thing**: one **moment** in a story, one **idea** in a sequence of ideas building an explanation of a topic.



Panels with more than one idea in them quickly become a garbled, unreadable mess.



The process of **choosing** these moments, and shaping how they flow and build on one another, is the basic work of making comics.





**Scripting** the comic includes planning the flow of panels and pages, as well as blocking out which images to use, the wording of text (and what text will be speech, narration etc).

In the ACC project it will likely be a series of "thumbnails" - small, thumbnail-sized sketches laid out on the page alongside the text.



It can also take the form of a text-only "script", a bit like a movie script but with pages and panels instead of scenes and shots.

Note: at this stage it is reasonably easy to make changes, add panels, change ideas, rewrite text etc...



Once the script is agreed, the artist can get on with **drawing** the comic. This generally takes a **long** time.



It is also really hard\* to change all the stuff we talked about before (panel order etc) once final art begins. These things really need to be locked down **before** this stage!



So you can see why discussion of things like art style and colour scheme can come later: The real work of the project week is in planning out the beats of the comic.



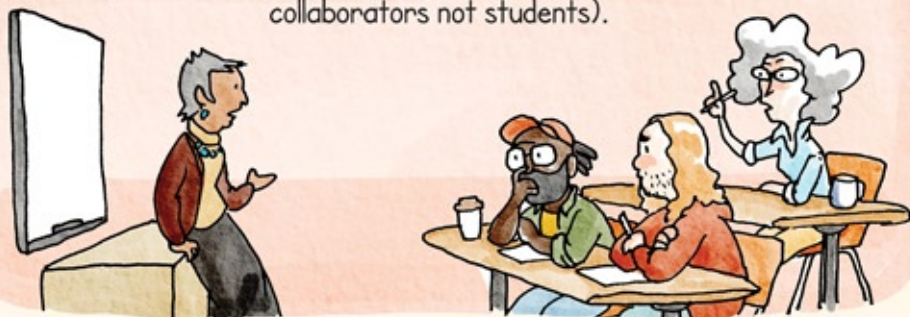
\* As well as being time-consuming, and thus expensive, even small-seeming changes can have big knock-on effects.

### STEP 3: COLLABORATE, LISTEN AND REFINE.

The project week includes 3 videocall meetings, giving a chance to discuss the creators' interpretations of your work.



It might be useful to think of each videocall as a seminar discussion (though this isn't a teaching project, and the comics creators are collaborators not students).



Like a seminar, it's a chance to explore and use the materials generated so far as a springboard for further work

This process may be more collaborative and less hierarchical than is (sometimes) the case in research and teaching settings.



It may also be more **open-ended** than you are used to. It is important to remain open to finding out what to do and how to do it **as you go along**.



Ideally, keep the project week clear in your diary



Well, as clear as possible...

Most project chat will happen in the group video calls, but you will need time to read, think and reflect.



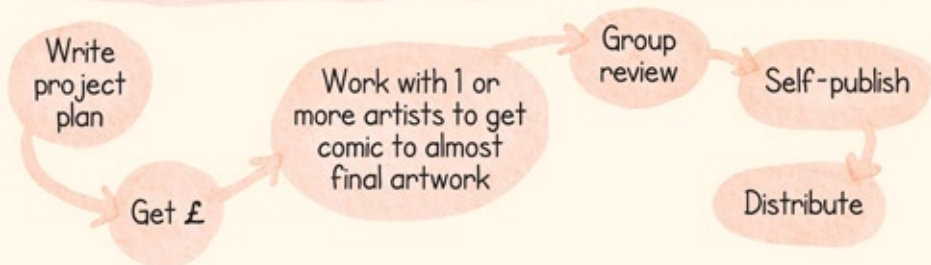
Be open-minded about what this drafting process could achieve. It may exactly fill the gap you have in mind. It may spark possibilities for further work.

At some point in making a comic it will become your role to do a final review of the wording and accuracy, but that wordsmithing comes **after** this process of drafting and putting your ideas in a meaningful flow of panels.



## STEP 4: WHAT HAPPENS NEXT...

You might now see a clear route to completing a comic...



Or you may realise that additional partners are needed.

For example, you may need input from teachers/pupils/curriculum specialists, to explore how the comic could be used as a resource in teaching.



You may realise a need for input from a charity or campaigning group working in this topic area.



Or you may want to show this draft to participants in your research to find out if it rings true for them.



The aim of this week is to get you from

"We could maybe somehow make a comic..."

to

"I want to make a comic of approximately X pages about Y aspects of my research for Z audience, and I understand the steps I need to take to get it made and distributed, and I will now put this understanding in a rock solid application for funding, then cross my fingers..."

# FOR FACILITATORS

This collaboration happens with the help of a facilitator.  
But what is a facilitator?



A facilitator might be a researcher and/or creative arts professional (or neither!) with experience of collaborative work. But don't expect one of the project collaborators to also take on this role. It is a substantial task and needs someone who can focus on it exclusively.

Facilitation involves both **principle** (collaboration, democracy, fairness) and **process** (deadlines, feedback, structure of meetings).



A facilitator is **not** quite...

✗ **A mediator**  
(participants are still responsible for their own behaviour).



✗ **A guide**  
(you'll be finding your way along with the rest of the group)



✗ **A butler**  
(you're not expected to do everything or anticipate every need)

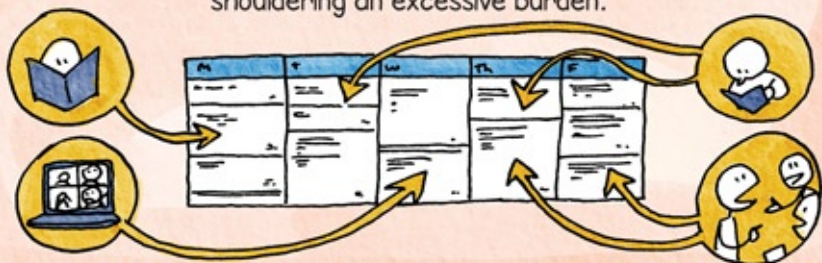


The facilitator's role is to keep the project on track, to help the collaborators focus on finding the core of their project and to identify target and wider potential audiences.

## STAGE 1: BEFORE THE WEEK...

Ensuring a visible and solid structure to the project week gives a baseline of stability for open-ended, exploratory work.

Communicate the time each person should expect to devote to the tasks within the project and ensure no-one ends up shouldering an excessive burden.



A quick chat should be sufficient to find out enough about the researcher's work and goals for this project to get started (you can ask for clarification as the project progresses).



You will also need to know enough about potential comics creators to be able to recruit a mix of 3 experienced contributors.



## STAGE 2: DURING THE WEEK...

It can take a while for the team to warm up. A list of working expectations can help. As can a degree of gentle prodding.



Once principles and processes are understood, take a step back and let participants collaborate, only intervening if the discussion is getting away from project goals.



Be ready to ask questions about terminology or jargon. If you show it's ok to ask daft questions, it can help get discussions going.



Aim for "constructive honesty" in your approach, and encourage open discussion of praise and criticism.



Bearing in mind, collaborators are often harshest about their own work.



You should also be ready to negotiate power dynamics in the group (is anyone taking up too much space?)



Generally, your role is to give participants space to think while keeping the conversation moving forward.

The facilitator's role of keeping the project on track takes many forms:

Offering examples from past projects...



Sharing links to the project's shared online folders...



Being aware of ethical, data and I.P. issues that may arise.



Drawing on your own experience to assure the group that obstacles and setbacks are a normal part of the process, and the project is still progressing.



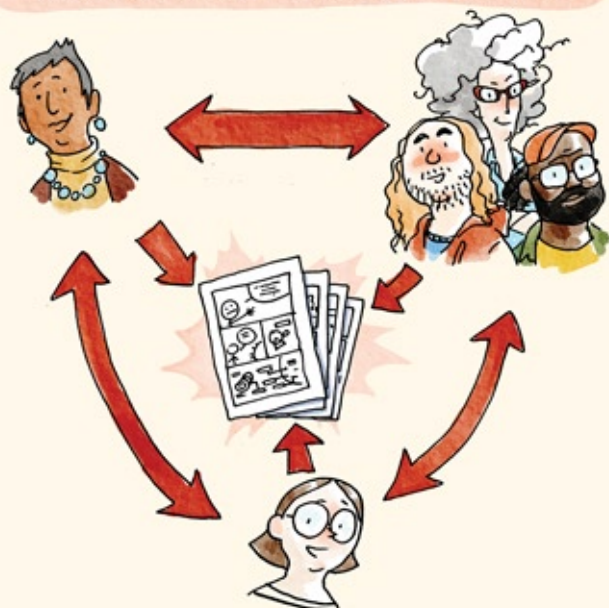
Just be careful to ensure you don't end up hovering, parenting, hand-holding or micro-managing.





This guide has introduced a model of collaboration between researchers, comics creators, and facilitators in making applied comics.

The neat version of the model looks like this:



But there may well be times when it feels more like this:



It is normal and expected for the model to get stretched, bent and updated to fit new ways of working.

Applied Comics Collaboration opens the possibility for a new way of working that includes:

- Building trust within a team to be able to work out sensitive and nuanced representations of critical information without resorting to clichés and harmful stereotypes.
- Incremental approaches to doing ambitious and rigorous work in a time of uncertainty.
- Making meaningful new connections through learning and working together.
- Respecting and being sensitive to the many forms and circumstances of labour involved in making creative work.

Having worked through the Applied Comics Collaborations process, you might not end up with the comic you planned on. But you could be pleasantly surprised with the comic you've drafted! The process of working together, especially the open and collaborative sharing of early ideas, can help make stronger, clearer and more exciting comics than when working alone.



This guide and the resources folder <http://appliedcomicsetc.com/collaborations> for this project are available as a free download. You are welcome to use and amend those resources for your own work; please acknowledge this Applied Comics Collaborations project in any future work based on this methodology.

## CREDITS FOR THIS COMIC

This guide was made by Lydia Wysocki  
and Adam & Lisa Murphy.

## PROJECT CREDITS

This comic is based on learning from the project  
**"Accelerating collaborations between  
comics creators and researchers"**

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